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SUBJECT: MCA FOSTERS CREATION OF NATIONAL MEDIA COUNCIL

1.(U) Marking a significant milestone in Malawi's Millennium Challenge Account Threshold program, the country's media community successfully reestablished an independent national Media Council on February 16. The Council will serve as a coordinating body for promoting press freedom, accrediting journalists, establishing and enforcing ethics rules, and addressing complaints about media behavior.

12. (U) USAID, MCC partner Casals and Associates, and the British High Commission worked with Malawi's leading media figures and institutions over the past year to do the necessary groundwork to reestablish the Council, which disbanded in 2001. The media community adopted a new charter and elected a board of governors for the Council. USAID and Casals will continue to work with the Council to identify sustainable sources of funding, establish a secretariat, recruit a director and train senior officers.

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13. (U) Formation of the Council is a key goal of the anti-corruption element of Malawi's MCA Threshold Country Plan. A free and professional media is essential for informing the public about complex corruption issues and for exposing corrupt practices. Most observers in Malawi agree that media practitioners in this young democracy have suffered from a lack of training and professional development, and that the media sector lacks credibility and clear professional standards. The media community resolved, in a major meeting in August 2004, to form an independent non-governmental Media Council to establish and enforce professional standards and receive complaints from the public. The GOM included the formation of the Council as a goal in its 2005 MCA Threshold country plan.

14. (U) The formation of the Media Council will certainly help advance the cause of media freedom and professionalism in Malawi. Key to its success will be the ongoing active participation of the country's major media organizations, which can provide sustainable funding. Unlike the previous failed council which enrolled members as individuals, accredited media organizations will be the dues-paying members of the new council. The newly-elected chairman of the council has set a goal of making the organization financially independent of donors within two years.

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